

POSTCOLONIAL JANE: *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE* AND  
PAKISTAN

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TC 359T  
Plan II Honors Program  
The University of Texas at Austin

May 15, 2019

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## ABSTRACT

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When Jane Austen penned the famous first lines of *Pride and Prejudice*, “it is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife”, it’s hard to believe she could have predicted just how universal those words would prove. In the course of my research on Jane Austen in the modern era, I was introduced a group of Pakistani women, who in 2014, formed the Jane Austen Society of Pakistan. Since its inception, the group has grown from a small sample of bibliophiles from Islamabad to an international, philanthropic community of Austenites nearly 3,000 strong. In addition to their charitable efforts, seven of the members recently co-authored a collection of short stories called *Austenistan*, which reimagines Jane Austen’s heroines as modern-day Pakistani women. The bulk of my research for this project focuses on contextualizing *Austenistan* within Jane Austen’s core texts and surveying the role of imperialism in enabling such a project.

To my family,

My friends for asking me questions,

My advisors for donating their time and expertise,

The Jane Austen Society of Pakistan,

&

To JA for inspiring myself and countless others

Thank you.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	2
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	3
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	4
INTRODUCTION.....	5
CHAPTER I: THE JANE AUSTEN SOCIETY OF PAKISTAN .....	7
CHAPTER II: MARRIAGE, MATCHMAKING, AND COURTSHIP .....	16
CHAPTER III: DOMINANCE OF WESTERN CULTURE .....	37
CHAPTER IV: CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL ISSUES.....	47
CHAPTER V: POSTCOLONIALISM .....	54
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	59
BIOGRAPHY .....	61

## INTRODUCTION

In a house near her brother's estate in Chawton, England Jane Austen penned six novels. More than 200 years after their publication, and the novels are established, quintessential works of British Literature. Austen's life and stories have been romanticized, dramatized, translated, dissected, and reimagined. Then entire Austen canon, including her epistolary novel, *Lady Susan*, has been adapted for television and film numerous times over the past 80 years. Off screen, her novels inspired a slew of modern authors, who have, in turn, created a multifaceted, ever-expanding world of all-things Austen. The multiplicity of forms Austen and her novels have taken across today's world demonstrates the relatability and timelessness of her novels, which transcended geographic and cultural barriers. A notable example of her ubiquitous appeal manifests in South Asia with Jane Austen Society of Pakistan, who recently reimagined and Austen's beloved heroines as modern Pakistani women in a collection of short stories called *Austenistan*. The body of this thesis will compare *Austenistan* and Austen, focusing on their connections, differences, and legacies.

For example, *Austenistan* presents marriage, matchmaking, and courtship with the same structure and necessity as Austen. Additionally, the preference for western culture over Pakistani culture in the vignettes emphasizes the continuing effects of colonialism in the JASP members' society. Furthermore, the inclusion and absence of contemporary social issues in *Austenistan* and Austen, respectively invites the question of the degrees of social engagement and impact in these texts. Finally, thinking specifically about imperialism as touched on in the section covering western culture, I will look at the participation of novels, specifically Jane

Austen's novels, in empire creation. To begin, however, I will take a closer look at the women behind *Austenistan*; the Jane Austen Society of Pakistan.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **The Jane Austen Society of Pakistan**



Fig. 2  
JASP members Mina Malik Hussain (left) with Mehr Husain at the annual “Austentacious” tea party in Lahore



Fig. 1  
Laaleen Sukhera (left), the founder of JASP, with Afshan Shaf

Jane Austen Societies exist across the world in North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia. In 2014, Laaleen Sukhera founded the Jane Austen Society of Pakistan (JASP) (not to be confused with the Jane Austen Summer Program, an Austen boot-camp hosted by the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, also denoted with the acronym “JASP”), which began as a small group of upper-class Pakistani women on Facebook with a kindred love of Regency era fiction.<sup>1</sup> The society was originally called the Jane Austen Society of Islamabad, the city where its founding membership resided, but as interest spread throughout the country,

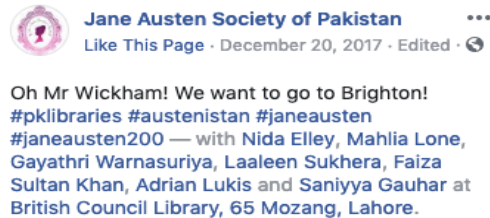
<sup>1</sup> “Jane Austen Summer Program,” Chatterjee, “Keeping Jane Austen Alive in Pakistan.”



the name changed to be more encompassing.<sup>2</sup> The JASP Facebook page now has over 2,800 followers, internationally.<sup>3</sup> The page features event updates and group meeting times, as well as photos of members, articles, and amusing Austen memes.



Fig. 3



## Pak's Austen society fights prejudice with a lot of pride

Journalist: Isabelle Fernandez

It was October 2016, the presidential elections were two weeks away, and Washington DC had new women on its mind. Emma, the spirited heroine of Jane Austen's 1813 novel was the poster girl of the annual general meeting of JASP — the Jane Austen Society of North America. As Janeites — universal devotees of Jane — crowded the 19th-century hall, the exhibition and, of course, the Regency Ball, one group played everyone's favourite: the Jane Austen Society of Pakistan.

"Will she be wearing a burqa? Do they allow women in Pakistan to read?" These were some of the questions swirling around in Saniyya Gauhar's head as she stood before a group of women in a black Regency gown and a gold sash. "They said your English is very good," Saniyya laughs on the phone from Lahore as she recalls their surprise at having a presentation started with the title of a ribbon cut. Starting off as a Facebook two-page two years ago, the Jane Austen Society of Pakistan (JASP) is now a full-fledged literary society. Members were invited to view this for a British documentary on the bicentenary of Austen's death, and they were called by the Jane Austen House Museum in Chawton, Hampshire, to be part of their Community Story Quilt project, where over 40 groups around the world will sew a quilt block which when put together will form a patchwork narrative of Austen's life. In the Jane Austen firmament, JASP is now a rising star. From a handful of Janeites in Islamabad, the society has grown to nearly 1,500 online members from 45 countries, including India and the UAE. While members keep up the chatter on Facebook and WhatsApp, it's their annual costume tea party that has caught the world's attention. It is a ritual that unfolds once a year in an Islamabad or Lahore mansion, two dozen women from the society come kitted out in empire-waist dresses and jewels, their gloved hands dangling reticules as they take their places around a



**INSIDE AUSTENISTAN**

> Literary group, which started as a Facebook page, has 1,500 online members from 45 countries

> Members hold an annual costume tea party in Islamabad or Lahore. Come kitted out in empire-waist dresses, and pearls

> They have also penned their own adaptations of Jane, set in modern-day Pakistan. The stories will be compiled in an anthology titled Austenistan!

> It's The Crown, or Jane Austen vs Chaitin Brown — do women authors create the most romantic heroines? Favourite and least favourite heroines, heroines, heroines, only screen portrayals — we never run out of topics, says Saniyya

Interestingly 7% of their Facebook membership is male, though no man has turned up for dress-ups yet, which is perhaps for the best. "A brief as an simultaneously romantic and cynical, as there tends to be a double-edged tone to our character analyses," says

Sukhera. "I remember at one meet-up, one of our members said her husband was just like Larry in her and there was a startled hush followed by a collective sigh! And we laugh a bit about the number of meeting Mr Collins one has to endure or avoid in our social circles, and wish there were more Westworths and Bertrams and Knightleys."

They may be separated by two centuries, a continent and a culture, but the members feel they have plenty to connect with Austen's 18th-century world, hobbled by patriarchy, class conventions and still clinging to the sub-

continental code that marrying rich is marrying right. Saniyya Sarki from Islamabad weighs in, saying, "Like the Regency era that was gripped by the Napoleonic wars and their aftermath, turmoil beyond the social bubble remains irrelevant to the innermost of upper and middle-class society. 'Patriot' society is largely content and safe from such 'volunteer' topics except as part of drawing room banter and as fuel for armchair activism." Michael Nank from Karachi adds: "Priority is key; one can never underestimate the emotional impact of the fashionably cut chikanकारी (lambert) on a social gathering!"

However, author and recent JASP inductee, Shafiqul Islam believes Austen's books are relevant to all, not just Pakistani society. "What is familiar is that in Pakistan and the subcontinent, marriage remains the ultimate goal for all women and this determines the way they behave, manipulate each other, proceed, and so on. The books also offer a way to be authentic in the midst of such role playing and pretence because all of Austen's heroines remain firmly themselves despite the fact that society wishes them to be otherwise. That is a timeless appeal."

As Jane Austen recedes on her heavenly chaise longue (despite no stiff wooden chairs up there) she must be gratified to know the sisterhood has spread to the subcontinent, and the women dipping into their customised gowns in Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi have found common cause with her. Jane: None of us want to be in our waltzes all our lives.

Fans across the globe are celebrating the 200th death anniversary of Jane Austen, but it is in Pakistan that some of the most ardent 'Janeites' reside



Fig. 5

Figures 3, 4, 5 courtesy of the Jane Austen Society of Pakistan's Facebook

<sup>2</sup> "Jane Austen Society of Pakistan (JASP) & Jane Austen Literacy Foundation JALP." Laaleen.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Austen Society of Pakistan's Facebook page.

The group meets periodically during the year, and they host an annual “Austentacious” tea party. Tea party attendees dress up and role-play as their favorite Jane Austen characters, drink tea, play games, and compete in Austen trivia.<sup>4</sup> Since its inception in 2014, the self-proclaimed “informal bookclub” has expanded and evolved into a force of literacy and authorship.<sup>5</sup>

In 2016, JASP founder and media professional, Laaleen Sukhera, joined forces with Caroline Jane Knight, Jane Austen’s fifth great niece and founder of the international Jane Austen Literacy Foundation (JALF), to establish the Pakistan chapter of the JALF. JALF’s mission is “To improve global literacy rates by funding the practice of literacy in communities in need across the world, in honour of Jane Austen.”<sup>6</sup> The Pakistan Chapter, led by Sukhera, focuses on “increasing awareness and privately donating funds towards registered Pakistani charities to encourage literacy among Pakistani children.”<sup>7</sup> In addition to their literacy efforts, seven of the members recently co-authored a collection of short stories called *Austenistan*. As mentioned in the introduction, *Austenistan* recasts Jane Austen characters as modern-day Pakistani women. Though setting these new Jane Austen stories in Pakistan may seem incompatible with the originals, the world faced by the Regency-era heroines closely parallels the society Sukhera and her co-authors experience in present-day Pakistan.

The appeal of Austen in Pakistan runs deeper than an appreciation of her triumphs as an author because the women of JASP actually endure the same social calendars,

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<sup>4</sup> Chatterjee, “Keeping Jane Austen Alive in Pakistan.” Eastern Eye Staff, “Laaleen Khan: Sense and Sensibility in Pakistan.”

<sup>5</sup> Mohsin, “Austenistan.”

<sup>6</sup> “Jane Austen Society of Pakistan (JASP) & Jane Austen Literacy Foundation JALP.” Laaleen.

<sup>7</sup> “Jane Austen Society of Pakistan (JASP) & Jane Austen Literacy Foundation JALP.” Laaleen.

responsibilities, restrictions, and expectations as the characters in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, or *Sense and Sensibility*. Sukhera explains, ““I know her books are 200 years old and set in small English county towns and villages but, really, her themes, her characters, her situations, her plots, they could have been written for us now.””<sup>8</sup>

In *Austenistan*, as in Austen’s England, reputation is vital to a woman’s future— one mistake will send all of Lahore’s “Auntys” into a flurry of Mrs. Bennet-esque gossip. Though extremely wealthy females have the luxury of more durable reputations, their ultimate purpose and expectation is the same; marry a wealthy man of equal or better status and wealth. This is where the “Auntys” come into play. “Auntys” are matchmaking relatives or family friends who devote their time and unwavering efforts to finding their nieces and nephews suitable spouses. During the social season (a roughly three-month period from December to March), Aunties acquire invitations to and introductions at weddings and balls with the expectation of a not-too-distant proposal.

Weddings in *Austenistan*’s Pakistan are grandiose demonstrations of status and wealth: guest lists over 1,000 and ceremonies lasting days, and even weeks. Social interactions at these affairs are dictated by a set of rules akin to those of the balls and assemblies in Austen. Should a man fancy a woman,

he might ask a mutual friend to make the introduction, or else he will point her out to his mother or aunt. If they do not know her, they will swiftly consult a friend or relation who does. Within minutes they will have the lowdown on the girl: her marital status, family background, wealth, age, education, job and reputation – whether she

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<sup>8</sup> Mohsin, “Austenistan.”

has been soiled by previous relationships and if so, how publicly. If her profile meets with familial approval, a meeting might be orchestrated.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, at the assembly in *Pride and Prejudice*, upon entering the scene, “Mr. Darcy soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien, and the report which was in general circulation within five minutes after his entrance, of his having ten thousand a year.”<sup>10</sup> The speed of dissemination in *Austenistan* and Austen demonstrates the importance of reputation, and, of course, wealth. The early age at which a woman is expected to marry also translates across the texts.

If a woman in *Austenistan* is still single in her early 30s, she is “advised not to be ‘too choosy’” or “‘get set in [her] ways’”, lest she is unable to “conform to the desires of her husband’s family.”<sup>11</sup> Unlike Austen’s heroine’s, however, an accomplished woman in Pakistan is not one with “a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, all the modern languages”, as Caroline Bingley outlines, but rather one with a respectable career.<sup>12</sup> In fact, membership of the JASP includes “journalists, academics, bankers, [and] entrepreneurs.”<sup>13</sup> Yet, even though a woman can earn her own living, she is still unable to inherit money. Just as the Bennet sisters in *Pride and Prejudice* and the Dashwood sisters in *Sense and Sensibility*, cannot inherit their fathers’ fortunes or property, so are daughters in Pakistan prohibited from inheriting from their fathers. Property passes from father to son, and

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<sup>9</sup> Mohsin, “Austenistan.”

<sup>10</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ch 3

<sup>11</sup> Mohsin, “Austenistan.”

<sup>12</sup> Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*,

<sup>13</sup> Mohsin, “Austenistan.”

if there is no son, to the closest male relative. However, the opportunity to earn an independent living does offer newfound freedoms such as the means to divorce.

Half a century ago, divorce in Pakistan “was unthinkable, so great was the shame”<sup>14</sup>. If a marriage was a disaster, wives were expected to “cope up” and live miserably.<sup>15</sup> The last 30 years have seen a deviation from this traditional view, and now divorce is relatively commonplace. However, unless a woman is independently wealthy, she must move into her parents’ home. For divorcees, *Persuasion*, a novel based on the “second chance at love” idea, is particularly appealing, and the frequency of divorce also means an increase in eligible suitors.

Eligibility requirements of Regency England are quite similar to those of twenty-first century Pakistan. Schooling, status, connections, and above all fortune top the check-list for a Pakistani bachelor. Interestingly, many of the top bachelors live abroad (outside Pakistan) in either Dubai, London, or the United States. These successful men travel home to Lahore or Islamabad for the social season looking for “a ‘nice girl’ from home. Even the recent flood of tech millionaires parallels the presence of new money in Jane Austen novels. Characters such as the Bingleys in *Pride and Prejudice* and Captain Wentworth in *Persuasion* indicate the growing world economy in Regency England. Either by trade or through naval conquests, if enough capital is made, pedigree is overlooked. The element of cousin marriages, as seen in *Mansfield Park* and encouraged in *Pride and Prejudice*, while off-putting to Westerners, is familiar to Pakistanis.

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<sup>14</sup> Mohsin, “Austenistan.”

<sup>15</sup> Mohsin, “Austenistan.”

Arranged marriages – agreements reached between families with little or no consultation with the boy and girl involved – place preservation of bloodlines, status and property over compatibility. Hence the huge popularity of marriage between cousins in Pakistan; more than half the population is married to the offspring of uncles or aunts.<sup>16</sup>

On that note, whether to a cousin or an expat tycoon, marriage is the measure of a Pakistani woman's success. Similarly, each of Austen's novels ends with the happy marriage of her heroine[s] to gentleman of consequence. Editorial director of Bloomsbury India, Faiza Khan, explains, "We love Austen so much because she can deliver a happy ending, we can believe in spite of seeing the world just as it is with all its unfairness and pettiness and exploitation and cruelty. She redresses the wrongs of her society on paper because that is all she or any of us can hope to do."<sup>17</sup> The women of JASP take ownership of this style in their book *Austenistan*.

### *Austenistan*

The parallels between Jane Austen's world and that of the JASP women inspired Laaleen and her friends to write a collection of short stories in which Jane Austen's characters are modern Pakistani women. Published in 2018, *Austenistan* comprises seven short stories; "The Fabulous Banker Boys", inspired by *Pride and Prejudice*, "Begum<sup>18</sup> Saira Returns", inspired by *Lady Susan*, "Emaan Ever After", inspired by *Emma*, "The Mughal Empire", inspired by

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<sup>16</sup> Mohsin, "Austenistan."

<sup>17</sup> Mohsin, "Austenistan."

<sup>18</sup> "Begum" is the title for a Muslim woman of high rank (as in India or Pakistan), *Merriam Webster Dictionary*.

*Pride and Prejudice*, “The Autumn Ball”, inspired by *Pride and Prejudice*, “Only the Deepest Love”, inspired by *Pride and Prejudice*, and “On the Verge”, inspired by *Pride and Prejudice*.<sup>19</sup> Each vignette spans around 30 pages and three of the seven are told in the first person. Though the stories vary in tone, certain themes pervade each: the omnipresence and imposition of marriage, matchmaking, and courtship, the preoccupation with materialistic and superficial aspects of a person’s character and appearance, the preference for and familiarity with Western culture, and the insertion of and commentary on current social situations.

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<sup>19</sup> Laaleen Sukhera, *Austenistan*, (India, Bloomsbury, 2018).

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Marriage, Matchmaking, and Courtship**



### *Matchmaking*

Perhaps the most apparent parallel between eighteenth-century England and modern-day Pakistan is the ever-present pressure of marriage and the formal courtship process. The responsibilities of matchmaking fall largely on the “Auntys”, older women, usually friends or relatives of eligible young men and women. During the “December wedding season”, Auntys procure invitations, initiate introductions, and vet the resumes of potential suitors throughout *Austenistan*.<sup>20</sup> Roya, the narrator of “On the Verge”, likens her “Sweetie Aunty” to a “Fairy Godmother” because she acquired an invitation “to a ball, and in the English countryside”, no less.<sup>21</sup> The work of an Aunty is not always quite so welcome, however. In “The Mughal Empire”, set immediately after the marriage of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy, or in this case, Erum and Mr. Dayyan, a mortified Kamila Mughal (Caroline Bingley) receives unsolicited information concerning her dance partner from none other than Mrs. Bilal (Mrs. Bennet).

‘I just got all the stats on Siraj Khan,’ said Mrs. Bilal in an excited and loud whisper.

‘He’s a lawyer, works at some fancy law firm, lives in London, has a fabulous flat in Notting Hill, both his parents are dead...’

Kamila glowered at Mrs. Bilal. ‘And why would I be interested in this?’

‘My dear, he’s so eligible! And Naheed told me that he’s also very nice—kind, polite, good values—so that’s a bonus!’

‘Uh! Aunty, he was at school with me. He was one of the nerds.’

‘Darling, it’s the nerds that make the best husbands. Always marry the nerds!’

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<sup>20</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Emaan Ever After,” 90.

<sup>21</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “On the Verge,” 210.

Kamila was appalled. This talk was vulgar.<sup>22</sup>

Tactless or not, Mrs. Bilal's advice must have recommended itself to some degree because the story ends with Kamila's marriage to Siraj. Furthermore, rejecting or refusing an Aunty is a dangerous endeavor because part of what makes them so formidable is their ability to build and destroy reputations. For example, when Leena, the Lydia character in "The Fabulous Banker Boys", attempts a liaison with playboy Dilwar (Wickham), Mrs. Baig fears, "the catty aunties will see her, assume the worst and she will get a 'fast' reputation."<sup>23</sup>

While there is no specific title, such as "Aunty", in Jane Austen for the matchmakers, the role is similarly filled by mothers and aunts of the protagonists. The most direct-to-Austen example in *Austenistan* is found in Polly and Mrs. Baig in "The Fabulous Banker Boys." Polly is Mr. Dar's (Mr. Darcy) Aunty. While Lady Catherine in *Pride and Prejudice* defends Mr. Darcy's match and Polly creates Mr. Dar's match, both are primary agents in the romantic lives of their nephews. Mrs. Bennet and her successor Mrs. Baig, both obsess over finding matches for their five daughters. For Mrs. Bennet, "The business of her life was to get her daughters married."<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Mrs. Baig laid her matchmaking foundation with her daughter's elementary school education, her belief being that, "if they were to make good matches, they must rub shoulders with the daughters of affluent families like the ones that went to the all girls' Grammar School. It was a necessary expense and one which their birth entitled them to."<sup>25</sup> Their birth as females also entitled, or perhaps more accurately, predestined them to the business of Marriage.

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<sup>22</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, "The Mughal Empire," 148.

<sup>23</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, "The Fabulous Banker Boys," 20.

<sup>24</sup> Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*.

<sup>25</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, "The Fabulous Banker Boys," 18.

Marriage is an inescapable career. Girls are, unbeknownst to them, groomed from early childhood for the profession. As Mrs. Baig explained, school is more than an education, it is a networking opportunity. In early adulthood, careers in the business world are viewed as supplemental to their *true* career. In the invitation to the Avalon ball in England, Roya sees as an opportunity for her blog, but Sweetie Aunty has other priorities; “‘Blog?’ Sweetie Aunty said in disgust. ‘Do you know what Saqnain Tanvir [the host] is set to inherit?’.”<sup>26</sup> The pressure to marry makes a proposal feel “like an accomplishment.” Not even divorce excuses abandoning this endeavor. Emaan believed “being married once would kind of take the pressure off but it turns out dating after divorce is hard.”<sup>27</sup> Once married, women hone their matchmaking skills for unmarried friends and daughters. In her middle and old age, a woman assumes the role of “Aunty” the peak of matchmaking and an essential role in the marriage industry. Matchmaking mothers are limited, however, in Austen and *Austenistan* by reliance on their husbands. Mr. Baig and Mr. Bennet are each called upon to meet the “banker boys” and the new tenant of Netherfield Hall, respectively, because decorum prohibits women from initiating such an interaction. This is particularly interesting because if one accepts marriage as the inevitable and lifelong career offered to women in modern-day Pakistan and Regency England, the boss is still the husband, however disinterested.

### *A Lady's Place*

Returning to Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Baig, prototypes of the traditional female role, when looking at their respective frustrations with their liberal-minded daughters, Elizabeth

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<sup>26</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “On the Verge,” 210.

<sup>27</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Emaan Ever After,” 91.

and Elisha, the societal expectations for women are clear. To begin, the dispositions of Elizabeth and Elisha counter the feminine ideal put forth by their mothers. Mrs. Bennet laments her husband's preference for Elizabeth because she "is not a bit better than the others; and I am sure she is not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good-humoured as Lydia."<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Mrs. Baig worries about Elisha's prospects because "No man likes a headstrong and blunt wife."<sup>29</sup> She resolves to "teach her to at least appear more subservient and pliant", because such qualities are appealing to men.<sup>30</sup> In addition to a compliant disposition, a specific skill set is also required. Saira, from "Begum Saira Returns", was "painstakingly instructed on how to dress for various occasions, how to host a party, how to make the perfect cup of tea, and how to mask disinterest and converse with people she didn't especially want to speak to", all in the hopes that these abilities would bait a wealthy husband.<sup>31</sup>

Despite her training, Saira, like her predecessor Lady Susan, scandalizes and enrages "proper" society by consciously indulging her sexuality. Soon after Saira married a wealthy bank executive, it became "clear that the wives of most of his friends and colleagues didn't like her. She was vibrant and sexy, and she enjoyed attention, none of which did her any favours in her social set."<sup>32</sup> Likewise, Lady Susan faces derision because she does "not confine herself to that sort of honest flirtation which satisfies most people, but aspires to the more delicious gratification of making a whole family miserable. By her behaviour to Mr. Mainwaring she gave jealousy and wretchedness to his wife, and by her attentions to a young

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<sup>28</sup> Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*.

<sup>29</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, "The Fabulous Banker Boys," 18.

<sup>30</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, "The Fabulous Banker Boys," 19.

<sup>31</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, "Begum Saira Returns," 48.

<sup>32</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, "Begum Saira Returns," 53.

man previously attached to Mr. Mainwaring's sister deprived an amiable girl of her lover.”<sup>33</sup>

On a lesser degree, Elisha disrupts the status quo in a conversation with Faiz Dar,

**E:** ‘I want to make my own way too...’

**FD:** ‘You mean you want to find your own husband and not have an arranged marriage?...’

**E:** ‘No,’ Elisha said sharply. ‘I want to have a career, a proper career.’<sup>34</sup>

Her clarification of *proper* career indicates that many careers other women have are placeholders, hobbies to occupy their time until they are married and become house wives. The expectation that women defer their careers is poignantly demonstrated in “The Autumn Ball.” “The Autumn Ball” is loosely based on the quote, “To be fond of dancing was a certain step towards falling in love,” from *Pride and Prejudice*.<sup>35</sup> Maya and her husband Hugo met dancing at a club in London, he was a rising diplomat and she was the deputy editor of *The Journal of Forensic Sciences*. Shortly after they were married, he was stationed in Nigeria and told Maya that “as a ‘trailing spouse’, the wife of a diplomat, she wasn’t allowed to work unless it was for a charity or the embassy.”<sup>36</sup> In Nigeria, Maya “felt relieved she didn’t have a job because the diplomatic scene was so social, and Hugo so busy that it was a given that she would set up and run the house.”<sup>37</sup> She succeeded in her position, and “Hugo would praise her dinners, her presentation, and her knack for making conversation with some fairly stodgy

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<sup>33</sup> Jane Austen, *Lady Susan*, Ch. IV.

<sup>34</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Fabulous Banker Boys,” 35.

<sup>35</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Autumn Ball,” 156.

<sup>36</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Autumn Ball,” 157.

<sup>37</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Autumn Ball,” 159.

diplomats to the high heavens.”<sup>38</sup> However, two years into their marriage and one transfer to the Islamabad office later, Hugo has little interest in dancing and little time to praise Maya.

When an opportunity to attend the Autumn Ball, the social event of the season, arrives, her husband’s refusal to dance disheartens Maya. They leave the ball early and Maya tells Hugo that their marriage is failing. Hugo unsuccessfully tries to make amends, and the couple rides home in “silence punctuated by the sound of Maya sniffing.”<sup>39</sup> When they arrive home, Maya dismisses the housekeeper for the evening while her husband tends to their young son. After regaining her composure, Maya peers into her son’s room “to find Hugo asleep on Armaan’s bed with Armaan fast asleep in his arms. The room was warm and the curls were pasted down on both their foreheads.”<sup>40</sup> The scene overwhelmed her with a “surge of love” and out on the balcony, “she began to slowly dance alone.”<sup>41</sup> While heartbreaking, Maya’s acceptance of her situation can be seen as a step toward success.

If marriage is the ultimate goal and prospect for a woman, then persevering in the endeavor is admirably pragmatic. As explained in Austen, “Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance”, but success is achieved through begetting an appropriate match.<sup>42</sup> When Jane from *Pride and Prejudice* announces to her father her engagement to the wealthy Mr. Bingley, his first words are “I congratulate you, Jane.”<sup>43</sup> Such words of affirmation are appropriate as Jane succeeded in her single purpose of procuring a proposal. This is made

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<sup>38</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Autumn Ball,” 159.

<sup>39</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Autumn Ball,” 176.

<sup>40</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Autumn Ball,” 177.

<sup>41</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Autumn Ball,” 177-178.

<sup>42</sup> Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*.

<sup>43</sup> Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*.

doubly successful by acquiring a proposal that will benefit her younger sisters. Jane Austen's novels end with the happy marriages of her heroines, and while there is little narrative material covering the married lives of these characters, the reality of marriage is brutally present in her novels. One need look no further than the Bennets in *Pride and Prejudice* or the Elliots in *Emma* for examples of the unpleasantness of marriage. In *Mansfield Park*, Miss Crawford claims to "look upon the Frasers to be about as unhappy as most other married people."<sup>44</sup> Yet, for a woman, marriage must be more about security than happiness.

No character demonstrates this better than Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice*, who marries Mr. Collins, who "to be sure, was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still he would be her husband."<sup>45</sup> Charlotte's acceptance of such a ridiculous creature may seem reprehensible, but at twenty-seven, with no excessive fortune and younger siblings, her choice is understandable, even admirable. Charlotte's only option is marriage if she is to avoid becoming a poor, pitied spinster like Ms. Bates in *Emma*. With no vocation aside from marriage, it may seem that women in Pakistan, who have careers, are in a more enviable position than the Regency Era gentry, but *Austenistan* mentions time and again that independent wealth merely an illusion of independence, not the reality.

Kamila in "The Mughal Empire" is the editor-in-chief as well as the owner of the society magazine *Pink*. She is the post Darcy-Bennet wedding Caroline Bingley and struggles to find a potential suitor now that her sole target is married. Her friend Murad offers some

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<sup>44</sup> Austen, *Mansfield Park*.

<sup>45</sup> Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*.

consolation, “‘You know everyone, you’re wealthy in your own right and don’t need anything from anyone—you have more choices than you think.’”, to which Kamila responds,

‘No, Murad, it’s harder for someone like me,’ Kamila said in a patronizing tone. ‘A woman should never marry beneath her social class. A rich woman can only marry a rich man or the son of a rich man if she wants to be happy, that is. And there are few people around who are as rich or richer than Daddy. And so, for someone like me, the pond is actually a puddle.’<sup>46</sup>

Not only is there constant pressure to marry, but one must also marry the right sort of person. Where Murad strayed was in her belief that Kamila does not “need anything from anyone.” In fact, in order to sustain her prestigious position in the social hierarchy, she needs the commendation of her peers and elders. The optics of a future engagement must align with the sociocultural expectations imposed on her. The necessity for a societally advantageous marriage also presents in Elisha’s concern that her “unsuitable family” will deter Mr. Dar’s affections in “The Fabulous Banker Boys.”

Returning to Kamila, if she chooses instead to not marry, she will be the pity of Pakistan’s Auntys. Myra, Roya’s sister in “On the Verge” “had decided to pursue a career early in life and barely got the time to meet men.”<sup>47</sup> Consequently, she becomes a cautionary tale for single women. Sweetie Aunty pleads with Roya to accept her blind date saying, “Look what happened to your poor sister! Bechari Myra, still single at thirty-five and working like a drudge, refusing to let me find her anyone.”<sup>48</sup> While a suitable career may supplement a

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<sup>46</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Mughal Empire”, 130.

<sup>47</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “On the Verge”, 212.

<sup>48</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “On the Verge”, 212.



marriage, it is not an appropriate alternative to it. At the end of “On the Verge”, Roya decides to pursue a man she believes to be a bodyguard, resolves to cease “following the money”, determined to make her “own way in the world.”<sup>49</sup> Ironically, this choice to disregard the societal norm is actually the perfect completion of it as the bodyguard is in fact the son of a duke. As it stands, Roya succeeds in countering the culture only so far as it demonstrates an uprightness of character and a liberty of mind. Yet, these virtues are subverted by the suitor’s aristocratic status. Would society still commend Roya’s choice if the man had actually been a bodyguard?

Though the plots of “The Autumn Ball”, “On the Verge”, and “The Mughal Empire” do not specifically follow any Jane Austen novel, their narratives broadly outline the situation of Austen heroines. The looming threat of becoming a spinster consistently pressures Austen heroines. With no means or opportunity of self-support, marriage is the only alternative to social alienation and pity and, in some cases, poverty. In Austen’s words, marriage is “the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want.”<sup>50</sup> Though the Pakistani women in *Austenistan* may have a career, the independence it affords is superficial. Furthermore, a career does not relieve the pressure of pursuing a marriage. Should a marriage and a career be achieved, it is unlikely that they may coexist. As seen in “The Autumn Ball”, Maya must relinquish her career as a deputy editor in favor of a career as a housewife.

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<sup>49</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “On the Verge”, 235.

<sup>50</sup> Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*.

### *Competition*

Female to female competition dates as far back as civilization. In the Book of Esther, the most beautiful young virgins competed to win King Xerxes's favor.<sup>51</sup> In Greek mythology, Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite offered competing bribes to be chosen as the most beautiful goddess.<sup>52</sup> In *Austenistan*, female rivalries often seem petty, yet they motivate much of the action. A key difference in Austen is that sisterly rivalries are virtually nonexistent. In "Begum Saira Returns", on the other hand, Saira's sister says bitterly, "If only our parents had spent this much time thinking about me, I wouldn't be such an old maid now."<sup>53</sup> The discrepancy of attention breeds resentment between sisters, the extent of which does not arise in Austen. Though Mrs. Bennett favors Lydia, it does not affect the familial relationships.

Moving from inter-family rivalries, the primary form of attack and degradation is upon the appearance of other women. Mrs. Bilal in "The Fabulous Banker Boys" accuses the Laeeqs<sup>54</sup> of absconding with their invitation to a wedding declaring, "I'm sure they kept it on purpose. Their daughter Shazia, bechari, is so plain compared to our girls."<sup>55</sup> A similar, nearly

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<sup>51</sup> When King Xerxes of Persia dismissed his wife from court for refusing an order, he asked his eunuchs to gather the most beautiful women from each of his provinces. These women then underwent beauty treatments and competed to please the king. Esther won the most favor and she became the new queen. The Bible, Esther 1,2.

<sup>52</sup> Paris, a prince of Troy was chosen by Zeus to bestow a golden apple to the most beautiful goddess. Hera offered kingly power, Athena military might, and Aphrodite the love of the most beautiful woman in the world. He chose Aphrodite, and the love of Helen, Queen of Sparta, started the Trojan War. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Paris-Greek-mythology>

<sup>53</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, "Begum Saira Returns", 63.

<sup>54</sup> The Austen counterpart is the Lucas family, neighbors of the Bennet family in *Pride and Prejudice*. Charlotte Lucas, Shazia in "The Fabulous Banker Boys", is a friend of Elizabeth Bennet.

<sup>55</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, "The Fabulous Banker Boys", 24.

exact phrase was uttered 200 years earlier by Mrs. Bennet, who said, “but you must own she [Charlotte] is very plain. Lady Lucas herself has often said so, and envied me Jane's beauty.”<sup>56</sup> In this case, not even her status as the family’s “particular friend” can save her from the public insults of Mrs. Bennet.<sup>57</sup> The trend of degrading the competition’s appearance continues throughout *Austenistan*; the protagonists’ rivals are described as “women emaciated to the point of not getting their period any longer”<sup>58</sup> and “girls with decent backgrounds, anorexia, and designer clothes.”<sup>59</sup> In both instances, the women are skinny to the point of being unhealthy and sickly, not positive or attractive qualities. Yet, the desire to be thin is equally present.

Emaan in “Emaan Ever After” outlines her situation saying, “Being thirty-two and divorced in Karachi society requires your dermatologist and personal trainer on speed dial. Don’t judge—the competition is twenty-two.”<sup>60</sup> To be competitive in the marriage market, Emaan must maintain a certain figure and appearance. In “Only the Deepest Love”, when a disgruntled student attacks Samina, Hashim comes to her aid. She is too weak to walk, and, despite riding the brink of consciousness, she is “conscious” of her “weight” when he carries her to his car.<sup>61</sup> Samina was attracted to Hashim during their first meeting at her cousin’s wedding, and, though badly injured, the societal emphasis on appearance is so ingrained that she is cognizant of her weight.

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<sup>56</sup> Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*.

<sup>57</sup> Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*.

<sup>58</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Fabulous Banker Boys”, 86.

<sup>59</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “On the Verge”, 211.

<sup>60</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Emaan Ever After”, 86.

<sup>61</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Only the Deepest Love”, 195.

Physical appearance is more than the body, attire is equally important. Clothes are frequent indicators of fashion and status. When Elizabeth Bennet walks to Netherfield to inquire after an ailing Jane, the Bingley sisters take to attacking her petticoat which was “six inches deep in mud.”<sup>62</sup> The inattention to her clothing must be indicative of some unsuitability of character that Caroline Bingley hopes will disgust Mr. Darcy. Caroline Bingley threatened by Mr. Darcy’s admiration of Elizabeth’s “fine eyes”, feels she must defend her desired position as the future Mrs. Darcy.<sup>63</sup> Interestingly, this same strategy is implemented for a different purpose in “The Mughal Empire.” Kamila, Caroline Bingley’s successor, horrified by the marriage of Mr. Dayyum to Ms. Bilal, looks at pictures of their honeymoon when her friend exclaims, “She’s wearing Valentino sandals!’... ‘Remember those hideous chappals she was wearing from Paradise Shoe Palace when we first met her?’”<sup>64</sup> In this case, the judgment serves to bolster Kamila’s confidence and superiority by reminding her of Erum Bilal’s inferior birth.

### *Dancing*

A key feature of the courtship process in Jane Austen and *Austenistan* is dancing. Specifically, formal dancing at either a ball or a wedding in which a gentleman must ask a lady to join him in a public, choreographed routine. This practice is as present in modern-day

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<sup>62</sup> Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*.

<sup>63</sup> Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*.

<sup>64</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Mughal Empire”, 127.

Pakistan as it was in Regency-era England, due in likely part to its allegorical connection to marriage. As Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* famously explained to the naive Catherine Morland,

**H:** ‘I consider a country-dance as an emblem of marriage. Fidelity and complaisance are the principal duties of both; and those men who do not choose to dance or marry themselves, have no business with the partners or wives of their neighbours.’

**C:** ‘But they are such very different things!’

**H:** ‘—That you think they cannot be compared together.’

**C:** ‘To be sure not. People that marry can never part, but must go and keep house together. People that dance only stand opposite each other in a long room for half an hour.’

**H:** ‘And such is your definition of matrimony and dancing. Taken in that light certainly, their resemblance is not striking; but I think I could place them in such a view. You will allow, that in both, man has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal; that in both, it is an engagement between man and woman, formed for the advantage of each; and that when once entered into, they belong exclusively to each other till the moment of its dissolution; that it is their duty, each to endeavour to give the other no cause for wishing that he or she had bestowed themselves elsewhere, and their best interest to keep their own imaginations from wandering towards the perfections of their neighbours, or fancying that they should have been better off with anyone else. You will allow all this?’

**C:** ‘Yes, to be sure, as you state it, all this sounds very well; but still they are so very different. I cannot look upon them at all in the same light, nor think the same duties belong to them.’

**H:** ‘In one respect, there certainly is a difference. In marriage, the man is supposed to provide for the support of the woman, the woman to make the home agreeable to the man; he is to purvey, and she is to smile. But in dancing, their duties are exactly changed; the agreeableness, the compliance are expected from him, while she furnishes the fan and the lavender water. That, I suppose, was the difference of duties which struck you, as rendering the conditions incapable of comparison.’

**C:** ‘No, indeed, I never thought of that.’<sup>65</sup>

Mr. Tilney’s main points are that in marriage and dancing, men have the advantage of choice while women have only power of refusal, both engagements are to the advantage of both parties, and each partner is responsible for keeping the other satisfied. In both *Pride and Prejudice* and “The Fabulous Banker Boys”, Elizabeth and Elisha utilize their power of refusal for their personal agendas. At Lucas Lodge, Sir Lucas implores Mr. Darcy to dance with Elizabeth to which she replies, “Indeed, sir, I have not the least intention of dancing. I entreat you not to suppose that I moved this way in order to beg for a partner.”<sup>66</sup> Neither Mr. Darcy nor Sir Lucas could sway her. In this case, Elizabeth’s refusal is her counter to Mr. Darcy’s snub at the assembly where he described her as “tolerable”, but “not handsome enough” to tempt him into dancing.<sup>67</sup> Elizabeth’s pride prevents her from accepting a man

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<sup>65</sup> Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*.

<sup>66</sup> Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*.

<sup>67</sup> Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*.

who rejected her. Additionally, by refusing him, she can possibly inflict a similar wound. In “The Fabulous Banker Boys”, Elisha follows the same pattern. When Faiz Dar’s Aunt encourages Faiz to dance, Elisha retorts, “I’m sure there are plenty of girls who would dance with you, but I’m not one of them.”<sup>68</sup> To explain her response, earlier in the evening she overheard Mr. Dar tell Mr. Baig, “Elisha is just OK. She isn’t hot enough to tempt me.”<sup>69</sup> Her bruised pride necessitates retaliation. Consequently, she engages her only course of agency: refusal. Though Mr. Tilney’s argument for dancing and marriage as endeavors that benefit both parties is endearing, it is rarely a reality.

When dancing, refusal is not always a viable option. The practice of “reserving” dances is relatively common and fabricating an excuse hours, even days in advance is impractical. In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland naively agrees to dance with John Thorpe at the evening’s ball, but when the event is at hand she realizes “that to go previously engaged to a ball does not necessarily increase either the dignity or enjoyment of a young lady.”<sup>70</sup> In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth is obliged to dance the first two dances at the Netherfield Ball with Mr. Collins, her ridiculous cousin. Naivety is not the issue in this case, but rather pressure induced by her mother. Mrs. Bennet’s flagrant desire for the engagement of her daughter supersedes Elizabeth’s power to refuse.

Examples of this subversion arrive in *Austenistan* as well. In “On the Verge”, Roya soon learns that her blind date is painfully unaware and balding. Nonetheless, “he pulled [her]

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<sup>68</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Fabulous Banker Boys”, 32.

<sup>69</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Fabulous Banker Boys”, 30.

<sup>70</sup> Austen, *Northanger Abbey*.

onto the dance floor and started gyrating to a Bollywood mash-up with Taylor Swift.”<sup>71</sup> Since he is her only acquaintance at the ball, she has no choice but to engage with him, even though he dances “with wild abandon, all flailing limbs and comically unrestrained facial expressions.”<sup>72</sup> In this instance, her situation prevents even the possibility of refusal.

Additionally, her Aunt, who arranged their meeting, expects Roya to make an effort with her host. Furthermore, a poor dance partner is emblematic of a poor life partner. Kamila in “The Mughal Empire” faces a similar, inescapable dance. At a wedding party the bride-to-be, Maryam, insists despite determined protestations, that Kamila dance the *mehndi* with her cousin. “Kamila could not believe this was happening and was even more irritated at her complete inability to excuse herself.”<sup>73</sup> Here, too, etiquette and expectations countermand the liberty of refusal. Moving forward, one point Mr. Tilney did not touch upon is the publicity of a dance.

Much like a marriage, whose established purpose is more for society’s benefit than its components, dancing is designed to be a spectacle. Those not partaking in the dance watch the couples with approbation, envy, or contempt. At the wedding in “The Fabulous Banker Boys”, “the bridesmaids and had all eyes on them as they carried out their special tasks. Enjoying their time in the limelight, they pouted and posed for selfies for their Instagram and SnapChat accounts, some being picked up by glossies always on the lookout for pretty faces at society weddings.”<sup>74</sup> In today’s age of social media and gossip magazines, the spectatorship of events such as weddings and balls swells. In Austen’s era, a lady’s performance at a ball

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<sup>71</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “On the Verge”, 224.

<sup>72</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “On the Verge”, 224-225.

<sup>73</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Mughal Empire”, 144.

<sup>74</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Fabulous Banker Boys”, 29.



would circulate locally, but not further. In *Austenistan*, a lady's performance at a ball circulates *globally*. In "On the Verge", Roya attends a ball in England and before the night is over, two tabloid posts feature her behavior: "Scott Tanvir spotted canoodling with blogger Roya Khalil, estranged fiancée of 'playboy' Princey" and "Europe's hottest princelings: Publicity-shy Olivier, youngest son of the Grand Duke of Luxembourg...CLICK FOR MORE... Olivier is the entrepreneur of ecofriendly high-rises in Scandinavia and is seen here in close conversation with blogger Roya Khalil, formerly photographed with Scott Tanvir..."<sup>75</sup> In the span of a few hours, Roya's dances and conversations with Scott and Oliver are internationally associated with her reputation. In Austen, "Loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable; that one false step involves her in endless ruin."<sup>76</sup> In *Austenistan*, the stakes remain while the notoriety amplifies. The paramount role of dancing in Austen and *Austenistan* is undeniable. In *Emma*, Harriet Smith holds Mr. Knightley in higher esteem for asking her to dance when she was without a partner than she does Mr. Churchill, who rescued her from gypsies. And, in all but two of the *Austenistan* stories, the heroine meets her leading man dancing. In order to dance, however, one must first be introduced.

### *Introductions*

The formality of introductions dictates much of the matchmaking and social interactions in *Austenistan* and Austen. In "Emaan Ever After", Emaan waits nearly four

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<sup>75</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, "On the Verge", 231.

<sup>76</sup> Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*.

hours to meet the date her friend, Saba, arranged at a dinner party. Emaan complains, “I haven’t even met the guy yet because she’s yet to show up and introduce us.”<sup>77</sup> Despite the small size of the gathering, propriety inhibits Emaan from introducing herself and her date from introducing himself without their mutual friend. When a mutual friend is not available, Auntys and hosts make the acquaintances. Incorporating a mediator to initiate introductions is standard practice in Jane Austen, too.

In the crowded Bath assembly rooms, Catherine Morland “longed to dance, but she had not an acquaintance in the room.”<sup>78</sup> As the evening progressed, “she felt yet more the awkwardness of having no party to join, no acquaintance to claim, no gentleman to assist them.”<sup>79</sup> The strict regulations on who can make introductions forbid Catherine and her steward Mrs. Allen from approaching any unknown persons without the assistance of a man. This prevents women from independently engaging anyone who a man of their acquaintance does not know. This standard drives Mrs. Bennet mad in the opening scene of *Pride and Prejudice*, in which Mr. Bennet refuses to call on Mr. Bingley, saying, “I see no occasion for that. You and the girls may go, or you may send them by themselves, which perhaps will be still better, for as you are as handsome as any of them, Mr. Bingley may like you the best of the party.”<sup>80</sup> By pairing the option to call on Mr. Bingley with the hypothetical of his favoring Mrs. Bennet, both comments are understood to be equally absurd. Eternally incapable of comprehending sarcasm, Mrs. Bennet panics, explaining to her husband, “Indeed you must

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<sup>77</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Emaan Ever After”, 95.

<sup>78</sup> Austen, *Northanger Abbey*.

<sup>79</sup> Austen, *Northanger Abbey*.

<sup>80</sup> Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*.

go, for it will be impossible for *us* to visit him if you do not.”<sup>81</sup> The ritual and regulation of introductions are thus another construct designed to inhibit the agency of females.

An interesting diversion from this convention takes place when the action in *Austenistan* transpires overseas. In “On the Verge”, Roya and her beau Oliver are not formally introduced at the Avondon Ball in England. Instead, they make eye contact across the dance floor and he introduces himself to her. The absence of the third party, which, at a ball in Pakistan would be indecorous, in England is acceptable. There is a different standard of behavior admissible in Western culture. Furthermore, people from England and the United States in Pakistan, are not moderated with the same vigilance. For example, Oliver is British, and the Avondon Ball is in England, so behavior, that in Pakistan would be indelicate, is instead inconsequential. Additionally, in “The Autumn Ball”, Maya and her husband met clubbing in London. Since there was no Aunty to introduce them, Hugo simply asked her to dance. Though both parties are Pakistani, the rules which govern their behavior at home are nullified abroad. Finally, in “Emaan Ever After”, Emaan recounts her prior romantic liaison, remarking, “The last time I had no-strings-attached-sex was the previous December season, when a nice American wedding guest allowed me an anonymous physical release.”<sup>82</sup>

Anonymity accounts for the majority of the appeal, but it is interesting that the wedding guest should specifically be American, Western, rather than simply “out-of-town.” There is an attitude among the heroines in *Austenistan* that engagement with western people and places is less scrutinized, and therefore, less reprehensible. Since Westerners have a different standard of propriety, meeting those standards is excusable, despite the liberality of those standards.

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<sup>81</sup> Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*.

<sup>82</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Emaan Ever After”, 104.

This raises a contradiction between *Austenistan*'s perpetuation of Western superiority and the simultaneous disdain for Western etiquette.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Dominance of Western Culture**

### *Education*

Western culture is prominent throughout *Austenistan*. In the previous section, the note was made about disdain for Western etiquette, which, while true, is where the contempt ends. In fact, the attitude is quite reversed, with an overwhelming preference for non-Pakistani culture. The partiality is so apparent, it reveals an underlying, at times defensive, inferiority felt by the characters.

University education in the upper class of *Austenistan* is done exclusively overseas, typically in the England and the United States. All of the stories include at least one reference to a character's international education. Mr. Dar in "The Fabulous Banker Boys" attended "Exeter in England."<sup>83</sup> Saira's daughter in "Begum Saira Returns" is "studying at Colombia."<sup>84</sup> Emaan in "Emaan Ever After" "did Economics at LSE"<sup>85</sup>, while Kamila in "The Mughal Empire" has a "degree from Princeton."<sup>86</sup> This pattern reflects the tendency toward "acquiring polish overseas"<sup>87</sup>, a perceived necessity in upper class Pakistan. The conception that polish cannot be acquired in Pakistan corroborates the assertion *Austenistan*'s characters regard Pakistan as substandard. The extensive references to imported goods further demonstrate this contention.

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<sup>83</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, "Fabulous Banker Boys", 34.

<sup>84</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, "Begum Saira Returns", 74.

<sup>85</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, "Emaan Ever After", 87.

<sup>86</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, "The Mughal Empire", 130.

<sup>87</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, "The Fabulous Banker Boys", 34.

### *Imports*

There overwhelming presence of non-Pakistani goods, services, and culture throughout *Austenistan* cannot be ignored. For example, the Baigs drive a “1999 model Toyota Corolla,”<sup>88</sup> and the driveway of Emaan’s dinner party is “dotted with various Land Cruisers and Mercs.”<sup>89</sup> Moving from cars to toys, Saira reminisces about Masooma (her daughter) and her childhood friend “playing with their Barbies.”<sup>90</sup> Unsurprisingly, technology and apps from western countries also infiltrate the characters’ lives.

They use western platforms as their primary avenues of communication, convenience, and connection. Apps and social media, primarily from the United States, are integral parts of the characters’ lives. The text mentions WhatsApp, a free messaging app owned by Facebook, as a primary form of communication. In “Emaan Ever After”, Emaan’s “WhatsApp pings with a message”,<sup>91</sup> and in “The Mughal Empire”, Kamila receives a “WhatsApp message from Chengiz.”<sup>92</sup> In “Only the Deepest Love”, Samina looks at a potential suitor’s “WhatsApp display picture” before their courtship begins over “a few WhatsApp messages.”<sup>93</sup> Transportation also falls under the western umbrella with the repeated use of Uber. In “On the Verge”, when Roya decides to go home, she pulls out her phone to “call an

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<sup>88</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Fabulous Banker Boys”, 25.

<sup>89</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Emaan Ever After”, 106.

<sup>90</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Begum Saira Returns” 51.

<sup>91</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Emaan Ever After”, 89.

<sup>92</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Mughal Empire”, 126.

<sup>93</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Only the Deepest Love”, 197, 199.

Uber.”<sup>94</sup> Thus, the pathways for communication and transportation are dominated by western culture.

Connections are also augmented by western sources. In “The Autumn Ball, when Maya moved back to Pakistan, “She searched out school friends on Facebook.”<sup>95</sup> In a different vein, characters use Tinder to connect with potential partners. Mr. Dar tells Elisha, “I wish I could swipe people away in real life as easily as on Tinder.”<sup>96</sup> In addition to connecting people throughout Pakistan, these platforms connect the characters globally. In “On the Verge”, after “someone’s blurry iPhone photo” of Roya appeared on a gossip website, she received “670 notifications on Facebook alone” and her “Instagram followers had swelled to 200,000+.”<sup>97</sup> These platforms are also used to the advantage of characters. In “Emaan Ever After”, Emaan’s friend at the London Facebook office helps her get a job with Instagram. Apart from the corporate careers, heroines such as Roya from “On the Verge” utilize social media for their blogging careers. In “The Fabulous Banker Boys”, the bridesmaids “pouted and posed for selfies for their Instagram and SnapChat accounts, some being picked up by glossies always on the lookout for pretty faces at society weddings.”<sup>98</sup> Wedding photographs are no longer features in society magazines, but business opportunities. The power of social media is especially present in “Only the Deepest Love”, where the trending Twitter hashtag, “#Jail4Asfandyar”, reflects a social movement.<sup>99</sup> With the prevalence of social media comes a

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<sup>94</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “On the Verge” 230.

<sup>95</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Autumn Ball”, 162.

<sup>96</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Fabulous Banker Boys” 36.

<sup>97</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “On the Verge”, 230-231.

<sup>98</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Fabulous Banker Boys”, 29.

<sup>99</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Only the Deepest Love”, 198.



flood of western vocabulary, particularly acronyms, and pop culture, that seamlessly integrate into the narrative.

“BYOB”,<sup>100</sup> “DJ”,<sup>101</sup> “PDA”,<sup>102</sup> “BFF.”<sup>103</sup> Each of these common English acronyms is also found in *Austenistan*. Their presence denotes the extensive integration of western culture, in particular, where pop culture is concerned. Firstly, men are often compared to prominent men in western culture. In “The Mughal Empire”, Kamila exclaims, ““He thinks he’s Prince William””,<sup>104</sup> in “Emaan Ever After”, Emaan accuses her friend Haroon of “bonking everyone like Christian Grey!”<sup>105</sup> in “The Autumn Ball”, Maya tells her husband he looks “like James Bond.”<sup>106</sup> and in “On the Verge”, Scott performed a “Michael Jacksonesque spin.”<sup>107</sup>

Additionally, the music played at balls and weddings throughout *Austenistan* is almost exclusively non-Pakistani. At the Autumn Ball, “The DJ christened the evening with ‘La Bamba’” because “everyone knew it.”<sup>108</sup> Later that evening, Maya made “some spirited moves to ‘Girls Just Wanna Have Fun’.”<sup>109</sup> The obnoxious Scott “started gyrating to a Bollywood mash-up with Taylor Swift” on the dance floor at Avondon.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, even the

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<sup>100</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “On the Verge”, 219.

<sup>101</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Autumn Ball”, 193.

<sup>102</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Emaan Ever After”, 104.

<sup>103</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Only the Deepest Love”, 203.

<sup>104</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Mughal Empire”, 107.

<sup>105</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Emaan Ever After”, 134.

<sup>106</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Autumn Ball”, 167.

<sup>107</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “On the Verge”, 225.

<sup>108</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Autumn Ball”, 173.

<sup>109</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Autumn Ball”, 174.

<sup>110</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “On the Verge”, 224.

terms for descriptions are evidence of western dominance. In “On the Verge”, Roya explains that she canceled her “Big Fat Pakistani Wedding”, a clear reference to the popular American romantic comedy, “My Big Fat Greek Wedding.”<sup>111</sup> Later, she describes a “fleet of Skittles-hued sports cars”<sup>112</sup> and a drink that “looked like Kryptonite.”<sup>113</sup> Pop culture from the United States proves so ubiquitous, that the characters employ it to relate to and describe their surroundings.

The mingling of Pakistani and western culture in *Austenistan* also illustrates the superiority (in the minds of the characters) of imports. All things fashionable in *Austenistan* are found abroad. In a café, Emaan spies “Karachi’s top one per cent nibbling at their egg-white omelets and granola bowls with imported berries.”<sup>114</sup> Her hosts later that evening “have exquisite taste — dinner is laid out in the most gorgeous tableware that has been carefully bubble-wrapped and transported, a few dishes at a time, in suitcases from trips abroad.”<sup>115</sup> Furthermore, in preparation for the wedding of the season, “Every Aunty was bursting with details, from the choice of event planners and the caterer’s menus, the invitations printed in India, the singers and bands being flown in, to the bootleggers bribed to ensure only the best sparkling wine for Haroon’s wife.”<sup>116</sup> The idea that “the best” must come from beyond Pakistan’s borders explains how even standards of beauty reflect a preference for Anglo-American and European features.

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<sup>111</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “On the Verge”, 208.

<sup>112</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “On the Verge”, 220.

<sup>113</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “On the Verge”, 223.

<sup>114</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Emaan Ever After”, 85.

<sup>115</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Emaan Ever After”, 95.

<sup>116</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Emaan Ever after”, 112.

The distinctly attractive characters in *Austenistan* routinely possess non-Pakistani physicality. In “Emaan Ever After” and “On the Verge”, attractive men have “Scandinavian height”<sup>117</sup> and “Slavic cheekbones.”<sup>118</sup> At other times, they have “classic Hollywood matinee idol features, a straight nose, melting hazel eyes, full lips”, and a cleft chin. The women, too, are considered more beautiful when “dressed up with powdered skin and blush.”<sup>119</sup> Characters are expected to uphold standards of beauty adopted from the west. These percolated ideals perpetuate a societal insecurity as they are, by nature, unattainable, and the impossibility of acquisition only augments the desirability. This might help explain why, though irreversibly intertwined, there is a sense that Pakistan and high-brow, European society should not mix. The paradox is evident in “On the Verge” when Roya exclaims, “A bhangra<sup>120</sup>? At your ball? At Avondon Hall?” [she] said, hoping the Gainsborough<sup>121</sup> on the nearby wall couldn’t hear [them].”<sup>122</sup> Roya’s surprise at her host’s choice to perform a bhangra at ball in the English countryside, demonstrates the idea that Pakistani culture belongs in Pakistan. This, of course, is not true of the reverse scenario as Pakistan, in many cases, embraces western culture. She further clarifies this belief by specifying Avondon Hall as an additional basis for her incredulity. Avondon Hall, a lavish estate in Surrey formerly owned by Lady Avondon, is a

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<sup>117</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Emaan Ever After,” 96.

<sup>118</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “On the Verge,” 210.

<sup>119</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Begum Saira Returns,” 64.

<sup>120</sup> “Bhangra, folk dance and music of the Punjab (northwestern India and northeastern Pakistan) and the popular music genre that emerged from it in the mid-to-late 20th century...a regular feature of wedding festivities, birthday parties, local fairs, and other celebrations.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

<sup>121</sup> “Thomas Gainsborough, (baptized May 14, 1727, Sudbury, Suffolk, Eng.—died August 2, 1788, London), portrait and landscape painter, the most versatile English painter of the 18th century.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

<sup>122</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “On the Verge”, 223.

quintessential specimen of British high society. That a bhangra should happen at all is horrifying enough, but the unsuitable locale exacerbates her dismay. Her consternation is surprising as the ball is a birthday celebration, and bhangras are frequently performed in Pakistan for such occasions. By saying she hopes the “Gainsborough on the nearby wall couldn’t hear” implies that a bhangra is something worthy of condescension, almost as if a pillar of high-brow western society should be disgraced to see such a dance performed in its presence. When bhangras and other traditional Pakistani dances are staged in Pakistan, there is no indication of inferiority or offense— only when executed internationally is there disdain. The perceived superiority of British customs and culture is evidenced throughout the *Austenistan* short stories.

One Pakistani character in “Begum Saira Returns” speaks in a “heavily put-on British accent.”<sup>123</sup> Though laughable for this pretension, his belief that a British accent would elevate him in society speaks to the appeal of English attributes. Furthermore, Islamabad housewives laud the popular tailor Raiz in “The Autumn Ball” for his ability to “replicate Western clothing.”<sup>124</sup> The protagonist in “Only the Deepest Love” bitterly describes the postcard of her estranged father and his young, British wife as a picture of “sunny first-world happiness.”<sup>125</sup> Preserved in each of these instances is unattainability. The accent and clothing are inauthentic, mere facsimiles of their superior originals. Samina’s bitterness stems more from the nature of her father’s new life than its general existence.

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<sup>123</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Begum Saira Returns,” 54.

<sup>124</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Autumn Ball,” 166.

<sup>125</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Only the Deepest Love,” 192.

The crux of the injury is in the details. His new wife is British, and the two met when she left England “to intern as a reporter and experience ‘exotic’ Pakistan.”<sup>126</sup> Her attitude toward Pakistan evidences feelings of superiority promulgated by western visitors. When she marries Samina’s father, the couple moves to England where they enjoy “sunny first-world happiness”, a state which Samina cannot secure, adding further insult to injury. Returning to Austen’s novels, the comparative superiority of town to provincial life bears a slight parallel to the “first-world” England and ‘exotic’ Pakistan relationship in *Austenistan*.

“Abroad” in Austen’s novels typically means outside the heroine’s county rather than her country. In *Mansfield Park*, Catherine Morland learns “that if adventures will not befall a young lady in her own village, she must seek them abroad.”<sup>127</sup> Of course, “abroad” in this case, is a carriage ride away in Bath. Once in Bath, Catherine’s chaperone Mrs. Allen enrobes her in a study of popular fashion so that educated purchases may be made without fear of faux pas. Indulgence in levels of luxury fashion only found abroad surfaces in *Austenistan* as well. In “The Mughal Empire”, Kamila’s envy is in full force over the London shopping spree in which her should-have-been mother-in-law, “bought Erum luxuries that most girls could only dream of: handbags from Hermès, Chanel, Bottega Veneta and Prada; shoes for every possible occasion in an assortment of styles and colours from Manolo Blahnik, Christian Louboutin, Jimmy Choo, Saint Laurent, Roger Vivier and Dior; lingerie from Rigby & Peller, Agent Provocateur and La Perla, and a designer wardrobe from some of the finest stores on Sloane Street.”<sup>128</sup> Though Pakistan has luxury malls and haute couture of its own,

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<sup>126</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Only the Deepest Love,” 192.

<sup>127</sup> Austen, *Mansfield Park*.

<sup>128</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Mughal Empire,” 120.

the demonstrated preference for those abroad highlights a perceived inferiority. While Jane Austen rarely mentions specific brands in her novels, the inducements of “abroad” retain the same appeal they do in *Austenistan* partly because one cannot travel abroad, or attain treasures abroad without wealth and autonomy. In *Emma*, Frank Churchill “had wanted very much to go abroad—had been very eager indeed to be allowed to travel”<sup>129</sup>, but his aunt prohibited him. Here, Frank has the means travel, but not the autonomy. Those with the means and opportunity to travel, however, benefit from the improvement of character and mind. Colonel Brandon, for instance, “has seen a great deal of the world; has been abroad, has read, and has a thinking mind”, answering “inquiries with readiness of good-breeding and good nature.”<sup>130</sup> His worldliness and intelligence are inextricably tied to his travels.

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<sup>129</sup> Austen, *Emma*.

<sup>130</sup> Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Contemporary Social Issues**

*Navigating Their Patriarchal Societies*

Fundamental to the Austen/*Austenistan* connection is their existence in and acknowledgement of the patriarchal systems their heroines endure. *Austenistan* heroines reiterate time and again the constraints traditional gender roles impose. Elisha (TFBB) complains, “My mother hates that I don’t want to be a housewife, but I keep telling her the world doesn’t revolve around men any longer.”<sup>131</sup> She later worries “He[Faiz Dar] must be shocked at Leena’s behaviour, but surely, he’s seen worse, and indeed, done worse himself. Typical double standards.”<sup>132</sup> These quotes touch on two primary restrictions applied to women; traditional gender roles and double standards. In “The Mughal Empire”, Laila casually explains, “No matter what career a woman has, in this country, you’re either known as someone’s daughter or someone’s wife. That’s why I never even bothered working.”<sup>133</sup> Maya’s situation in “The Autumn Ball” confirms this idea. Though she is a successful editor in London, when she marries Hugo, she must embrace her position “as a ‘trailing spouse’, the wife of a diplomat” in which, she is not “allowed to work unless it was for a charity or the embassy.”<sup>134</sup>

Similarly, as justification for marrying Mr. Collins (*PP*) the narrator elaborates that for Charlotte, “Without thinking highly either of men or matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and

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<sup>131</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Fabulous Banker Boys,” 35.

<sup>132</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Fabulous Banker Boys,” 39.

<sup>133</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Mughal Empire,” 130.

<sup>134</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “The Autumn Ball,” 157.



however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want.”<sup>135</sup>

For the women of Austen, matrimony is the only career, for the women of *Austenistan*, matrimony is the *primary* career. That is, as Maya learns, once married, a female’s occupation is to be a wife, a homemaker. Any career achieved before the marriage is subsidiary. This is why Emma (*E*) exclaims, “it is always incomprehensible to a man that a woman should ever refuse an offer of marriage. A man always imagines a woman to be ready for anybody who asks her.”<sup>136</sup> As offended as Emma is, given that marriage is the only available career for a woman, the rejection of a proposal is essentially a rejection of success and security, which is not only incomprehensible, but irresponsible. Realistically, women *should* be “ready for anybody who asks her” because, as Charlotte (*PP*) recognizes, it is “their pleasantest preservation from want.”<sup>137</sup> Though the stakes are not quite so high in *Austenistan* as women may work and thus save themselves from destitution, marriage is certainly the only preservation from social alienation. Needless to say, a man may retain bachelor status in both Austen and *Austenistan* without fear of poverty or pity.

Current events are much more of a priority in *Austenistan* than they are in Austen. According to Susan Morgan, “Austen’s social concerns are with human relations, not society.”<sup>138</sup> Still, in *Persuasion*, when Anne Elliot and Captain Harville debate the superior constancy of men versus women (both parties defending their sex), the topic of literary history yields an interesting consideration:

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<sup>135</sup> Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*.

<sup>136</sup> Austen, *Emma*.

<sup>137</sup> Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*.

<sup>138</sup> Susan Morgan, “Intelligence in *Pride and Prejudice*,” 55.

**CH:** ‘As I was saying we shall never agree, I suppose, upon this point. No man and woman, would, probably. But let me observe that all histories are against you--all stories, prose and verse. If I had such a memory as Benwick, I could bring you fifty quotations in a moment on my side the argument, and I do not think I ever opened a book in my life which had not something to say upon woman's inconstancy. Songs and proverbs, all talk of woman's fickleness. But perhaps you will say, these were all written by men.’

**AE:** ‘Perhaps I shall. Yes, yes, if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything.’<sup>139</sup>

While not an overt social commentary, it spotlights gender inequality in education and, consequently, literature. Interestingly, Harville, not Anne, first acknowledges that “prose and verse” are all written by men, and thus their depictions of women may not be objective. Anne builds on this point, explaining that not only do prose and verse favor men, but also education. Where Harville identifies the injustice, Anne gives reason for it. Men have the benefit of “so much higher a degree” of education, that the opportunity to write is entirely in their favor. Women have not the advantage of defending themselves in books, so any opinions perpetuated by male authors are deemed inadmissible.

In *Austenistan*, general points of inequality such as this are replaced with specific current events highlighting social issues. For example, Saira (“BSR”) reassures herself with; “We [Pakistan] have a woman prime minister, I can attend a wedding on my own.”<sup>140</sup> This

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<sup>139</sup> Austen, *Persuasion*.

<sup>140</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Begum Saira Returns,” 49.

reminder outlines the uniqueness and inspiration potential of a female president. Saira believes a woman in a position of governmental power evolved gender roles to normalize attending a wedding alone. In “Only the Deepest Love”, Samina is less optimistic concerning the current political scene because “Only a few months ago, one of his [her student’s father] close associates had been accused of the rape of a girl who had gone missing a week after the news broke. But as was the case with most sordid scandals involving powerful perpetrators and powerless victims, news outlets conveniently forgot the story soon after.”<sup>141</sup> So, Saira is emancipated while Samina is frustrated, yet both allow current events to impact their actions.

### *Sex and Sexuality*

Austen omits sex, *Austenistan* embraces it, yet both challenge their societal norms. In her article “Why There’s No Sex In Jane Austen”, Susan Morgan explains that the absence of sex in Austen’s novels is not to their detriment, but rather a literary innovation. To clarify “absence of sex”, she says,

when I claim that Austen has gotten rid of the sex, I refer specifically to a literary sexuality, the notion of sexuality in much of eighteenth-century fiction, the notion of sexuality which defines character, and plot, in sociobiological terms. That notion does, of course, occur outside novels and outside the eighteenth century, a dark fact which brightens the continuing radicalism of Austen’s work.<sup>142</sup>

The consequence of creating this “sex-less” narrative is that female virginity (a state which entirely depends on the choices of men) is no longer the basis for the character-defining traits of purity and innocence. Instead, Austen introduces “the simple and endlessly influential point

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<sup>141</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Only the Deepest Love,” 182.

<sup>142</sup> Susan Morgan, “Why There’s No Sex In Jane Austen,” 351.

that women can grow, can be educated, can mature, without the catalyst of a penis”, which is the case for almost all other eighteenth century heroines. This opens the door for character development precipitated by a heroine’s choices, rather than a hero’s dominance.

Furthermore, Austen’s decision to disrupt the literary form paved the way for her predecessors to travel new avenues of femininity. Morgan explains, “Hardy and Eliot were able to explore the evils of a woman being sexually defined by her culture in part because Austen had banished from fiction, and thus effectively revealed as a fiction, the fiction of a woman being sexually defined by nature.”<sup>143</sup> Contrastingly, yet not incongruously, *Austenistan*’s unreserved attitude toward sex presents a different vein of female liberality.

While the society of *Austenistan* is very conservative, the narration is not. At a cycling class, Emaan (“EEA”) finds herself “ruminating over how [her] lady bits are numb from the bike seat and how that’s probably the most action they’re going to get this year.”<sup>144</sup> Yet even for Emaan, a divorcé who cannot “keep up the virginal ingénue pretence”, alluding not only to her vagina, but to the potential for extramarital sex is quite scandalous.<sup>145</sup> Even still, descriptions of sex within marriage are surprisingly explicit. Samina’s newlywed cousin (“OtDL”) struggles to understand her husband’s apparent lack of interest. She recounts, ““Last night, I was crying in bed as quietly as I could, I thought he’d gone to sleep. He got up and told me to get on my knees. I was so pathetically grateful even for this... so I got on my knees and then, nothing, the bastard dry humped me with his shorts on. Then he went for a shower, came back to bed and fell asleep within ten minutes.””<sup>146</sup> The story confirms Samina’s

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<sup>143</sup> Morgan, “Why There’s No Sex In Jane Austen,” 351.

<sup>144</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Emaan Ever After”, 90.

<sup>145</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Emaan Ever After”, 103.

<sup>146</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, “Only the Deepest Love”, 187.

suspicions that Sobia's husband is gay. Sadly, "Being gay carried such a stigma that even if parents allowed themselves to suspect such a thing of their child, their 'solution' was marriage, to hell with their lives and the lives of the poor women who never got their chance at love."<sup>147</sup> Thus, the graphic description of Sobia's marital sex (or the lack thereof) serves as a commentary on the social pressure to uphold convention rather than as a wholly sexual episode. The consequence of this distinction is that sex is used, not for entertainment value, but for creating a discourse on inequality and unrealistic expectations. This dialog extends later in the text when Samina recalls, "My colleague Nafisa had gone through this. Her husband refused to consummate the marriage a good six months into their newlywed life. And even when they did it, it was forced, brief and impersonal. He never desired her... Given their conventional upbringing, and the fact that the couple had two young children, divorce wasn't even an option."<sup>148</sup> This memory signifies the unfortunate regularity of the situation. Conversely, though not necessarily consciously, it is the absence of sex that disrupts the norm in Austen's novels.

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<sup>147</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, "Only the Deepest Love", 188.

<sup>148</sup> Sukhera, *Austenistan*, "Only the Deepest Love", 188.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Postcolonialism**

### *Imperialistic Influence*

With all of the surprising connections between Regency era England and modern-day Pakistan, it is irresponsible not to acknowledge the history which is in large part responsible for the similarities. Before gaining its independence in 1947, Pakistan was part of the United Kingdom's Indian Empire for 200 years.<sup>149</sup> After two centuries of imperialism, much of British culture found its way to Pakistan.

In his book *Culture and Imperialism*, literary critic Edward Said discusses the British and French empires, explaining that “whatever is good or bad about places at home is shipped out and assigned comparable virtue or vice abroad.”<sup>150</sup> It is unsurprising, then, that after 200 years of British control, the “vices and virtues” of English culture have disseminated throughout Pakistan. To link this with Jane Austen, Said furthers his argument by posing the novel as

an incorporative, quasi-encyclopedic cultural form. Packed into it are both a highly regulated plot mechanism and an entire system of social reference that depends on the existing institutions of bourgeois society, their authority and power. The novelistic hero and heroine exhibit the restlessness and energy characteristic of the enterprising bourgeoisie, and they are permitted adventures in which their experiences reveal to them the limits of what they can aspire to, where they can go, what they can become. Novels therefore end... with the protagonists' accession to stability (usually in the

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<sup>149</sup> “Pakistan: History.” History | The Commonwealth.

<sup>150</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 79.

form of marriage or confirmed identity, as is the case with novels of Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot).<sup>151</sup>

With this in mind, it is evident why women of the JASP connect so directly to Austen—the British culture incorporated into Pakistani culture through two centuries of imperialism is preserved and displayed in her novels. It also explains why, despite feminist strides, the *Austenistan* short stories still end with the “accession to stability” of the heroines by way of marriage. The novel, as articulated by Said, projects a “knowable community of Englishmen and women” which “shaped the idea of England in such a way as to give it identity, presence, ways of reusable articulation.”<sup>152</sup> In other words, novels, such as those in the Austen canon, are not only reflections of their culture, but are also instrumental factors in *creating* that culture. By imbedding the society into writing, Austen’s words transcend geographic and era-specific boundaries to become “reusable”—not only in literal reinterpretations such as *Austenistan*, but also in daily life. Her plots, which express an “attainable quality of life,”<sup>153</sup> are nothing too unimaginable and her characters and scenarios are familiar, which make her a distinctly prime candidate for establishing modern connections. One JASP member even stated in an NPR interview that reading Jane Austen helped members of their society to better understand and guide their own lives.

I would be remiss not to mention, however, that while the cultural impact of two centuries of imperialism is undeniable, in an increasingly connected world the influence of pop culture in creating a preference for and dominance of western culture must also be

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<sup>151</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 71.

<sup>152</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 72.

<sup>153</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 84.



considered. It is possible that partialities to the west, which began under imperial rule, are now perpetuated by technology, social media, apps, etc. Nonetheless, that the two-hundred-year-old society which Jane Austen so aptly depicts found such traction in present-day Pakistan reinforces an imperialist history.

## CONCLUSION

During the height of colonialism, “European culture often, if not always, characterized itself in such a way as simultaneously to validate its own preferences while also advocating those preferences in conjunction with distant imperial rule.”<sup>154</sup> These preferences, as stated before, are still so dominant that they persist 5,000 miles from their origin, generations after their initiation. Yet what is so exciting and important about this topic is that because these values are embedded into Pakistani culture, they enabled the women of the Jane Austen Society of Pakistan to relate to Austen’s novels in such a way that they are empowered to grasp at any opportunity for independence. One member says,

‘What resonates with us is that she taught us how to navigate the world... She said, it's OK; it's OK; you have constraints. But then she teaches you how to remain in the system and yet do something for yourself.’<sup>155</sup>

What we see in *Austenistan* is exactly that; these women using Jane Austen to do something for themselves.

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<sup>154</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 81.

<sup>155</sup> “Austenistan”, *Rough Translation*.

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